

PRESS RELEASE: Exhibition *DISCO* at Wereldmuseum Amsterdam

Beyond beats and glitter: disco as a mirror of a social revolution

From 10 October 2026, a floor of 835 m² at Wereldmuseum Amsterdam will be transformed into one vast dance floor. With the exhibition *DISCO*, the museum pays an electrifying tribute to this hugely influential musical movement. Emerging from the underground clubs of New York, this iconic genre grew during the 1970s into a worldwide social revolution centred on freedom, inclusion, and self-expression. Visitors to the exhibition dance their way through hundreds of original disco tracks, videos, art, fashion, and design, experiencing the connective power of disco.



Philharmonie Paris, Expo Disco, Scéno 2025 © Joachim Bertrand

DISCO is a large-scale exploration of an influential movement that extends far beyond music alone, for disco transformed the music industry, reshaped nightlife, and became a catalyst for emancipation. The exhibition presents disco as an interplay of social change, artistic innovation, and political struggle, placing the genre firmly within its historical and societal context. The exhibition was conceived by the Musée de la Musique – Philharmonie de Paris and curated by Jean-Yves Leloup and Marion Challier. For this Amsterdam showing, Wereldmuseum has supplemented it with the Dutch context and adapted the design.

For many visitors, *DISCO* will also be a deeply personal experience of recognition. The exhibition leads them through hundreds of iconic tracks, evoking memories of dance floors, parties, first loves, and other shared moments. From world-famous classics to unexpected discoveries: the sheer wealth of music, images, and stories creates a sense of joy, nostalgia, and collective memory, one in which visitors do not merely watch and listen, but above all feel how disco moved people, and still does today.

"I'm struck by the relevance of this exhibition for our times. It shows how dance floors became spaces of resistance, identity, and belonging – then and now. The message – you are free to be who you are – may resonate more powerfully today than ever before."

- Mariëlle Pals, Head of Programming, Wereldmuseum



Bill Bernstein, Paradise Garage, 1979 © Bill Bernstein

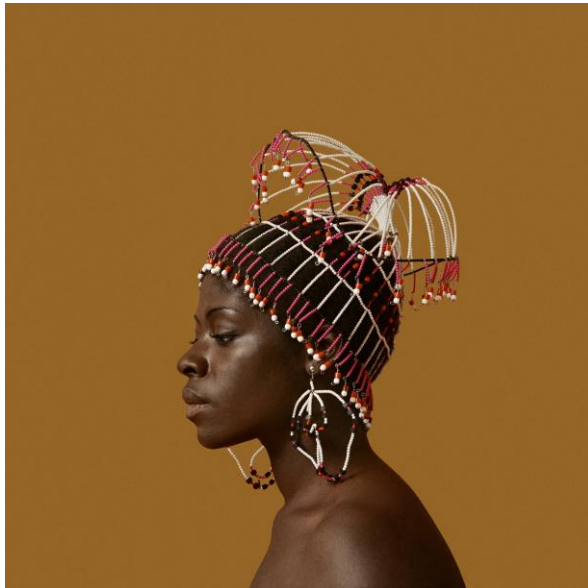
FROM DANCE FLOOR TO EMANCIPATION MOVEMENT

The exhibition shows how disco is inextricably bound up with sweeping social change. It transformed not only the music industry and nightlife but also became a catalyst for the emancipation of African Americans, Latin Americans, women, and queer and trans people – communities that found a space for visibility, expression, and solidarity in the clubs. On the dance floor, there was but one rule: you were there to dance and be yourself.

DISCO at Wereldmuseum Amsterdam traces how this development was closely intertwined with broader social movements, such as the struggle for civil rights, women's emancipation, and LGBTQ+ rights. In clubs where background, gender, and class could fade into the background, a new form of collective freedom took shape. The exhibition brings this experience to life through audio, video, photography, and visual art, including works by Keith Haring and Andy Warhol. Kwame Brathwaite's *Black is Beautiful* photographs celebrate the pride and beauty of Blackness, while portraits of iconic performers show how disco gave rise to new forms of self-image and self-expression.

Disco was driven in no small part by female artists, and above all by African American female singers who placed independence, sexuality, and self-awareness at the heart of their music. Their work resonated with the feminist movement of the time while finding an equally powerful echo with the LGBTQ+ community. Works of art, photographs, and audiovisual material give those influential female voices a prominent place in the exhibition. The activist posters of artist Faith Ringgold, created in protest against sexism, connect disco culture with political struggle and feminist movements. Objects such as an early rainbow flag and

documentary footage illustrate the ties between the disco scene and the LGBTQ+ movement. The Stonewall Riots – which broke out after a police raid on a queer bar in Greenwich Village – and the activism that followed are widely regarded as the beginning of the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement.



Links: Kwame Brathwaite, *Sikolo Brathwaite* wearing a headpiece designed by Carolee Prince, *AJASS*, 1970
Rechts: Kwame Brathwaite, *Untitled*, 1970

NIGHTLIFE AS CULTURAL FORCE

The exhibition sets disco against the backdrop of 1970s New York – a city marked by poverty, social tension, and violence. It was precisely within this turbulent context that a vibrant club culture flourished, offering an escape. Those clubs were vital spaces of freedom and resistance. From intimate gatherings in private lofts to legendary venues such as Paradise Garage, they served as meeting places and provided a safe environment in which people could be who they wanted to be. Original objects, such as membership cards, invitations, and DJ equipment, offer a glimpse into the club life of the seventies and eighties.

Photographers such as Michael Abramson and Meryl Meisler documented the nightlife of neighbourhoods, including Chicago's South Side and New York's Harlem and Bushwick. Their photographs capture the dancing crowds as well as the energy and resilience of communities creating new ways of coming together.

Disco also had a profound influence on fashion and performance. Outfits became more daring, lighter, and designed for movement. The exhibition features glittering dresses, platform shoes, and striking accessories – among them the iconic metallic blue catsuit worn by singer Jerney Kaagman in the video for the hit *Weekend* (1979) and again, many years later, in a broadcast of *Idols* (2008). Costumes, photographs, and footage of performers and groups such as The Cockettes show how gender expression was being radically reimagined. In the disco era, fashion became an extension of identity and self-presentation, on the dance floor and on stage.

In the late 1970s, the so-called 'Disco Sucks' movement emerged in the United States, a backlash against disco's popularity. The painting *Disco Demolition Night* (2022) by Hernan Bas (b. 1978) depicts an incident at Comiskey Park stadium in Chicago, where rock fans stormed the field and burned hundreds of disco records during the interval of a baseball

game. Behind the criticism of the music often lay thinly veiled racism directed at the Black, Latino, and queer communities that had given birth to the genre.

The disco scene was also devastated by the AIDS epidemic from the early 1980s onwards. Many artists, DJs, club-goers, and members of the LGBTQ+ community were directly affected, casting a tragic shadow over the exuberant freedom of the disco era.



Hernan Bas, Disco Demolition Night, 2022

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum purchase funded by Zoltan Varga, Lizbeth and George Krupp, and Aleksandra Janke and Andrew McCormack, 2022.778 © 2022 Hernan Bas, courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London

THE ICONIC SOUND OF DISCO

Alongside the social significance of disco, the exhibition explores its musical and technological development – from a style rooted in Black American culture, with timeless classics that spoke to generations, to the architecture of its signature sound: from the four-on-the-floor beat to the lush arrangements of strings, brass, and synthesisers.

Original equipment, including a MiniMoog synthesiser and a Roland drum machine, illustrates how producers and musicians collaborated to create innovative sounds. A signed Fender Stratocaster belonging to Nile Rodgers and a wide selection of vinyl records show how music production and distribution were being transformed. The introduction of the 12-inch single allowed for longer, dance-friendly tracks and gave DJs greater creative control over the dance floor. A new interactive installation invites visitors to produce their own remix.

From the late 1970s, disco spread across the world. In Europe, a distinct variant emerged that had a more electronic sound. The Netherlands was no exception: disco grew into a popular movement, fuelled by television programmes and local discotheques. Posters, fashion, and archival material from Dutch collections show how disco reached a wide audience here too, laying the foundations for dance music – today one of the Netherlands' most significant cultural exports.

Disco brings people together on the dance floor, and the exhibition embraces that spirit wholeheartedly. In the interactive Soul Train room – one of the highlights of the exhibition – visitors are transported to the iconic dance floor of the 1970s. With original footage, light effects, and historical clips bringing the era to life, standing still is just not an option. The installation weaves together music, dance, and fashion in an exhilarating way, making tangible just how vast disco's cultural influence has been – and continues to be.

The exhibition *DISCO* runs from 10 October 2026 to 22 August 2027 at Wereldmuseum Amsterdam.